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ABSTRACT

Although the school-choice movement has spread quickly, little time has been taken to assess whether the claimed benefits of school choice have actually been realized. This policy brief summarizes empirical evidence to date and addresses the following questions: Who gains from school choice and who loses? Do innovative school organizations arise under liberalized market conditions? and Do children in choice programs learn more? The brief focuses on three programs--voucher experiments in Milwaukee (Wisconsin) and San Antonio (Texas), and magnet schools in Montgomery County, Maryland. Findings indicate that: (1) choice programs designed to select higher achieving students may shut out lower income families; (2) choice programs that provide greater cultural continuity between home and school may yield achievement benefits; (3) however, each school's particular ethnic identity may erode progress toward racial integration; (4) school choice does not guarantee greater parental involvement; (5) school choice programs generally have high levels of parent satisfaction; (6) the learning effects of choice schools are inconsistent; (7) market structures fail to operate in the absence of sufficient information about available educational options; and (8) when public school authorities fail to capitalize on the appealing features of choice schools--smaller enrollments, enthusiastic and experienced teachers, and distinct curricular identities--school choice will do little to diversify enrollments. Three figures are included. (LMI)

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WHO GAINS, WHO LOSES FROM SCHOOL CHOICE: A RESEARCH SUMMARY

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By Bruce Fuller
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OVERVIEW: A VIBRANT EDUCATIONAL MOVEMENT

School choice initiatives have become enormously popular nationwide.

- Over two-thirds of the American people consistently support giving parents greater choice over where their children attend school, according to annual Gallup polls. Far fewer support the use of tax revenues to support private schools.

- Surging political support—from some inner-city community activists to the Christian Coalition—has sparked the creation of highly variable school-choice experiments, including voucher programs for private schools and public magnet schools, the latter now serving over 1.2 million children nationwide.

- Over a dozen state legislatures have now authorized the creation of charter schools—including California, Massachusetts, and Wisconsin. These schools operate independently of government regulation and are very diverse: some offer ethno-centric curricula, others emphasize tight discipline and orderly Asian-like pedagogical practices.

LOTS OF LIGHT, BUT LITTLE ILLUMINATION OF LOCAL EFFECTS

Catching fire is the idea of giving individual parents and community groups the power to craft and operate their own schools. Yet this movement has spread so quickly, little time has been taken to assess whether the claimed benefits of school choice are actually realized.

This policy brief summarizes empirical evidence to date. Focusing on three specific programs for which hard evaluation evidence now exists, specific policy questions are addressed:

- Who gains from school choice and who loses? Which families are more likely to exit their neighborhood school and partake in a new choice school?

- Do innovative school organizations arise under liberalized market conditions? How do local public and private schools respond to the availability of vouchers or independent charters?

- Do children learn more? What does the research say about student achievement when parents and youngsters participate in choice programs?

HARD EVIDENCE ON THREE PROGRAMS

The school-choice movement is wide and robust. But actual choice experiments remain young and modest. This policy brief focuses on three programs—voucher experiments in Milwaukee and San Antonio, magnets in Montgomery County, Maryland. Initial findings on other programs are briefly reviewed at the end of this brief.

These particular programs were chosen due to the

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new evidence they provide. This illuminates the local effects of these experiments and points to how choice initiatives can be better designed at state and local levels.

This brief addresses pragmatic design questions. How should choice students be selected? How can information to parents be effective, and what are the dangers of inadequate information? How does the detailed structure of the program influence whether access is equitable or unequal? Does the organizational underbelly of choice schools look different from typical public schools? Will market conditions guarantee innovative school management and more stimulating classroom practices?

MUCH MORE TO LEARN

As you read this brief remember that very little is known about school choice programs. Variations in local conditions and program structure also drive who gains and who benefits from school choice. We are just beginning to understand which parents vigorously engage choice programs, and which children may be left behind. This initial evidence does highlight tentative lessons for policy makers, educators, and local activists now engaged in devising new forms of schooling.

SAN ANTONIO, TX

Do Voucher Students Learn More?

Over 80% of San Antonio's student population come from Hispanic families. Surveys show that many of these parents have been dissatisfied with the quality of their neighborhood schools, worried about the perceived lack of discipline, low rates of learning, and mixed relations between teachers and parents.

Responding to these concerns, San Antonio developed a multilingual set of schools that provide total emersion into Latino culture, history and language. About one thousand parents have already chosen these alternative schools, with a waiting list now reaching about 500 names.

A private school-choice program arose at the same time, parallel to the public initiative. The business community created a private scholarship program, allowing more than 2,000 families to choose Catholic schools for their youngsters. This brief focuses on the five-year-old public-school multicultural program. Overall effects on parental satisfaction and pupil achievement for the two programs are quite similar.

Which Families Choose?

The public choice program is clearly providing attractive options for low-income parents. Only 18% of the

QUESTIONS ABOUT SCHOOL CHOICE

What are the actual effects of these ambitious reforms? How can state and local choice initiatives be better structured to accomplish intended objectives?

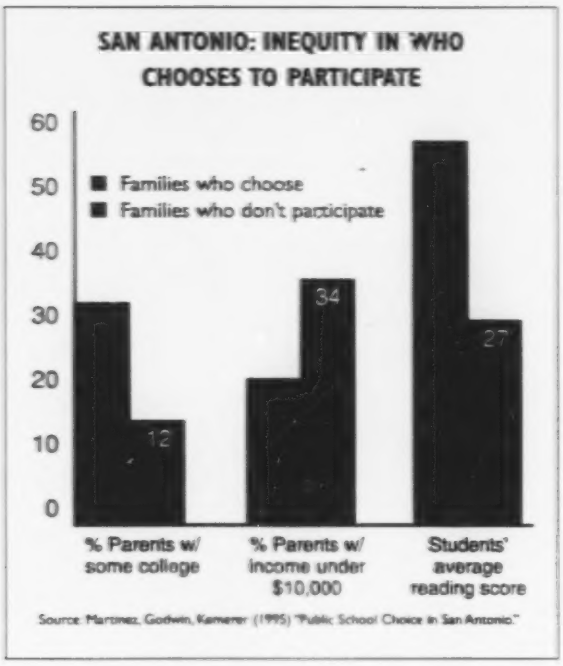
In **San Antonio** children participating in public and private choice programs appear to achieve at higher levels, compared to youngsters from similar low-income families. But parents more strongly committed to their child's education enter the programs at higher rates. Does this exacerbate inequalities among working-class and impoverished families?

In **Milwaukee** private schools have vigorously responded during the first three years of this voucher experiment. Parent satisfaction rises when families opt for a non-public community school. But gains in student achievement have yet to be consistently observed. Do parents simply feel good, while students experience few benefits?

In **Montgomery County, Maryland,** just north of Washington D.C., a long running magnet school program has created new school options. Yet racial integration is stalled. Parents tend to choose schools with children who are like their kids, not based on school quality. Many ethnic minority parents know little about existing magnet schools. Does the soft-sell of magnet programs advance inequality?

San Antonio children who choose a multicultural school come from families with earnings over $35,000 (20% earn less than $10,000). Among non-choosing parents, just 8% exceed this income level. Less than a third of the "choosers" have attended any college courses. This initial finding dispels the notion that low-income parents will not actively choose alternative schools.

But note that parents who do choose are better off and have higher educational expectations for their children than non-choosing parents. Figure 1 reveals sharp differences between choosing and non-choosing parents. This raises the question of whether the choice program lead to greater inequality in the nature of school opportunities made available to working-class and impoverished families.



This inequity inadvertently results from how the public choice program is designed. Admission to the multicultural choice schools is linked, in part, to the child's prior achievement level in their neighborhood school. Figure 1 shows that children of choosing parents scored 57 on the district-wide reading test, versus just 27 among children of non-choosing parents. The selection process thus plays a role in structuring which families gain access to the alternative schools.

Do Choice Students Learn More?

After one year in the choice program, students do appear to learn at a higher rate than similar students who remain in their neighborhood school. The difference is modest but statistically significant. Importantly, girls benefit more than boys, since in this Latino community female youths outperform males and have a higher likelihood of being accepted into the public choice program.

The achievement effect of one year of participation is assessed after taking into account the unequal characteristics of choosing and non-choosing parents. But thoroughly removing these prior family background effects is difficult to do in any study. More research is required to assess whether previously unmeasured differences between choosing and non-choosing parents may partially explain this apparent effect of the multicultural choice schools.

The evaluation showed no change in parental satisfaction. This is largely due to the fact that choosing parents have fewer contacts with their new school, compared to non-choosing parents and their neighborhood school. This counter intuitive pattern is explained partially by the fact that children of non-choosing parents have more contact with their schools over academic performance problems.

Major Lessons

- The details of how choice programs are designed can make a huge difference. The selection of higher achieving students may set up a rational reward system—kids in neighborhood schools may work harder to compete for limited seats in the choice schools. But as selectivity goes up, better off families will more likely be served. And children of the lowest income, least involved parents will be left behind.

- Choice programs that provide greater cultural continuity between home and school may yield achievement benefits. The Latino emersion feature of the San Antonio program may contribute to achievement gains. Certainly the ethno-centric character of

the choice schools distinguish them from more homogenized neighborhood schools.

- School choice does not guarantee greater parental involvement. The alternative multilingual schools have not found an effective way to boost school-home interaction. The market remedy of greater choice does not necessarily lead to changes in institutional habits that discourage parental involvement.

MILWAUKEE, WI

A Lively School Response, But Do Children Learn More?

The Milwaukee voucher program recently completed its fifth year of operation. Effects have been studied over a three-year period on children's learning, parental satisfaction, and organizational health. The Wisconsin legislature is considering a major expansion of this intriguing program.

The initiative now serves almost 1,000 low-income families who seek to enroll their child in a non-sectarian private school. Eligible families must have incomes not exceeding 175% of the poverty line. This program was advocated by black and Hispanic activists who were dissatisfied with the public schools. Among families participating, average earnings equal just $11,625. African-Americans comprise about three-fourths of all choosing parents, Hispanics about 17%.

A Vigorous Response by Community Schools

Inner-city activists—descendants of the 1960s community action movement—originally pushed the state legislature to permit the voucher program. A small number of Afro-centric and Hispanic schools already operated within Milwaukee's ethnic neighborhoods. The voucher, worth about $3,000, has fueled rapid growth in these private community schools. In the program's first year, 1990, seven alternative schools were certified to participate. This number has risen to 12 schools.

Most of these community schools offer an ethnic curriculum and level of discipline that matches parents' own preferences. The dilemma is that the schools may worsen racial segregation. Enrollment in the Urban Day School and the Harambee School is almost 100% black; Bruce-Guadalupe Community School is close to 100% Hispanic. One reason the voucher program is so popular among Milwaukee's low-income parents, points out evaluator John Witte, is that it avoids bussing one's child out of the community.

Who Benefits, Who Loses?

The Milwaukee experience is quite similar to San Antonio in one crucial way: those parents already most involved in their child's education are more likely to participate in the voucher program. Over half (53%) of choosing parents report having attended some college courses, versus just 30% of matched low-income Milwaukee parents which comprise the control group. Parents actively participating in the voucher program have fewer children and report more consistent supervision of homework, compared to non-choosers. Over three-fourths of participating families are headed by single parents.

Parents' responses to their new choice program are consistently positive. Choosing parents displayed greater dissatisfaction with their neighborhood school than non-choosing parents. Yet participating families had much higher opinions of their new choice schools in terms of how well they liked the teachers, discipline levels, the instructional program, and opportunities to get involved in the school. Ironically the rate at which families leave a particular choice school is high: about 35% each year. This reflects, in part, the high rate of transience among low-income households.

Do Choice Students Learn More?

In Milwaukee after three years the short answer is, no. Initially, participating students appeared to do somewhat better in reading achievement than similar low-income youngsters. This difference is shown in Figure 2 for the end of the first year of exposure, in the school year 1990-1991. But after two years, as a wider array of children and schools moved into the voucher

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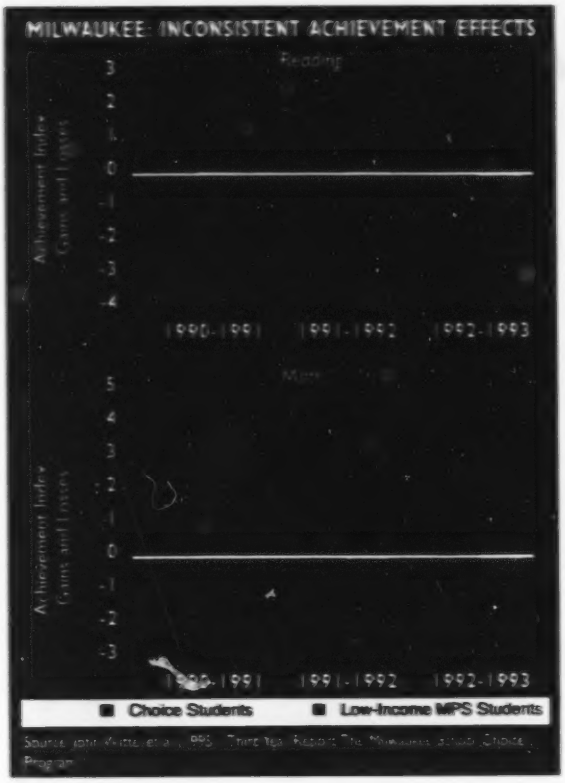
program—this learning advantage disappeared. In fact, reading scores of choice students fell below similar low-income students (the second pair of vertical bars in Figure 2).



By the evaluation's third year—tracking change between the 1992 and 1993 school years—reading scores were essentially no different between choice students and similar low-income Milwaukee public school pupils. Choice students did outperform others in mathematics in the third year, but this advantage was not observed in the first two years of the evaluation.

Lessons Learned

- Voucher programs can certainly serve low-income families. And community schools vibrantly respond when voucher forms of support become available. As with San Antonio, the cultural continuity between the school's culture and that of the home's may contribute to the popularity of these schools. But each school's particular ethnic identity may erode progress toward racial integration. This is a difficult dilemma.

- Choice schools are doing something right—possessing features that spark higher parental satisfaction with their child's school. Maintaining stricter discipline seems to be a factor. Parents also feel school principals and teachers are more accessible, relative to those in public schools.

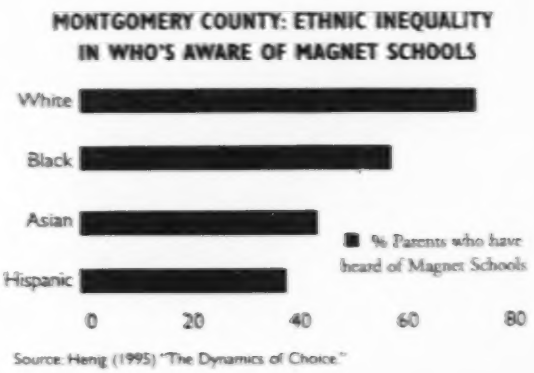
- We have much to learn about which features of choice schools lead to achievement gains and which characteristics make no difference. The learning effects of Milwaukee's choice schools are highly inconsistent. It is likely that certain school-level factors help to explain learning gains when they do appear.

MONTGOMERY COUNTY, MD

The Underselling of Magnet Schools?

Magnet schools originally arose in the early 1970s as a device for furthering desegregation and avoiding the contentious remedy of involuntary busing. In 1977 Montgomery County, laying just north of Washington D.C., established seven magnet schools. This number grew to 16 elementary, two middle-school and one high school magnet by 1987.

But the elementary school magnets have been relatively under-sold by the local school authorities. Parents vary greatly among ethnic groups even in whether they have heard the term, "magnet school." Figure 3 shows that 72% of all white parents have heard the term, whereas just 39% of all Hispanic parents can recall hearing the "magnet school" label.



Source: Henig (1995) "The Dynamics of Choice."

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In the early 1990s, professor Jeffrey Henig began to evaluate this long-standing program, curious over why this 15-year program had failed to ignite interest in school choice beyond about 10% of all parents. Equally serious, parental mobility that has occurred has done very little to advance racial integration in this diverse county.

Distinct Magnets within a Blurred Policy

The Montgomery evaluation shows that magnet schools with a distinct identity and enthusiastic teachers can attract a diverse range of families and children. Language emersion and expressly multicultural schools—one for Spanish and one for French—are among the most popular magnets. Each attracts upper middle-class white and black students. But many other magnets have very hazy identities, drawing few applicants and very little change in the pattern of racial segregation which has long existed.

The local school board has made efforts to encourage greater movement toward magnet schools. Bus transportation, for example, is provided to participating students. But the bulk of enrollment in magnet schools comes from children who simply live close by. The average number of applications to join a magnet equals less than 10% of the school's existing enrollment on average.

Choosing Cultural Similarity?

White parents tend to choose magnet schools that have higher proportions of white enrollment. Similarly, African-American parents prefer magnets with a greater share of black students. Professor Henig found that parents choose more on the basis of the school's proximity and racial composition, than on the school's character or concrete indicators of quality.

Qualitative features of magnets are taken into account—and judgements follow quite similar patterns between white and black parents. For example, both ethnic groups prefer smaller magnet schools, the presence of more experienced teachers, the presence of a kindergarten program, as well as the foreign language emphasis.

More assertive district policies might yield a more robust response by parents. There is no way of knowing for sure. It is not surprising that in the absence of clearer information and stronger incentives, parents resort to familiarity and school proximity as the major criteria underlying their constrained choices.

Major Lessons

- Extra efforts are required to ensure that choice options are equally understood and appear accessible by diverse families. Market structures never operate well in the absence of sufficient information about available options. When information is unequally available, say among affluent versus low-income families, school choice will likely exacerbate inequities in educational opportunity.

- We are learning about the qualitative features of schools that seem attractive to all parents: smaller enrollments, enthusiastic and experienced teachers, and distinct curricular identities. When public school authorities fail to capitalize on these appealing features, school choice will do little to diversify enrollments. Unless school organizations offer innovative programs, we should not be surprised when parents do not respond. While the market dynamics of school choice may fuel such options, organizational innovation can also result from strong district-level leadership within the regular public school system.

OTHER EVALUATION FINDINGS

Several other studies have focused on specific local choice programs or on national patterns.

- In Detroit, professor Valerie Lee found that the strongest support for school choice options comes from inner-city black parents. Deeply worried about educational quality, these parents give their neighborhood schools a grade of C- on average. Central Detroit parents who are more likely to participate in choice programs tend to be better edu-

cated and earn a bit more. These findings are similar to the San Antonio results in terms of increasing stratification among working-class and impoverished urban families.

- In St. Louis, researcher Amy Stuart Wells spent time talking with black youths who chose to participate in, or avoid, a voluntary busing program that moved them out to predominantly white suburban schools. Many black families use the program as a way to exit their inner-city neighborhood school. But a significant portion of the adolescents return to their local school, uncomfortable with attending white schools or concerned with their relatively low achievement levels. Even when parents believe "choice schools" are of higher quality, youths often make the choice to remain in or return to their familiar neighborhood school.

- Nationwide, the number of children attending magnet schools has nearly tripled since the early 1980s, currently exceeding 1.2 million youngsters. According to a study by Rolf Blank, Council of Chief State School Officers, magnets are operated by school districts which serve a quarter of all students nationwide. About 60 percent of students to participating in magnet schools are from ethnic minority families. Very little evidence exists on whether this choice leads to learning gains. One initial study by University of Chicago researchers Kathryn Schiller and Barbara Schneider found no achievement gains. But more work relating particular program features to achievement changes is sorely needed.

- Uncontrolled statewide choice programs can yield especially regressive effects. Massachusetts' version of open enrollment allows affluent communities to receive a portion of school revenues originally allotted to impoverished districts when the former attracts students from low-income areas. Richard Fossey has documented this regressive flow of revenues. Many local school committees have refused to participate given the program's unfair effects.
- Massive voucher and school-choice programs on either side of the K-12 sector show mixed results. One study of the two-decade old Pell Grant program shows that it has spurred access to community colleges among working-class and minority youths. However, unequal access to four-year colleges continues to exist, untouched by this multi-billion dollar portable grant program.

- Preschool and child-care programs are now largely financed through vouchers and tax credits. When these subsidy flows are carefully targeted on those families most in need, and states regulate quality, access has been widened and quality has been fairly distributed across poor and affluent communities.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

These empirical findings stem from Harvard University's three-year seminar on school choice and family policy.

Complete details are available in a forthcoming book published by Teachers College Press, Columbia University: *School Choice: The Cultural Logic of Families, The Political Rationality of Institutions*, edited by Bruce Fuller, Richard Elmore, and Gary Orfield. This policy brief draws on the original research of Valerie Martinez (San Antonio), John Witte (Milwaukee), Jeffrey Henig (Montgomery County), and their respective colleagues.

For additional information contact: Connie Koprowicz, National Conference of State Legislatures, Denver, 303-830-2200; Bruce Fuller, Harvard University, 617-496-4817.

Earlier studies of the effects of school choice are available:

- Education Week (1992) *A Matter of Choice.* Special supplement, Washington, D.C.
- Carnegie Foundation (1992) *School Choice: A Special Report.* Princeton, New Jersey.

- J. Henig (1994) *Rethinking School Choice: Limits of the Market Metaphor.* Princeton University Press.

- X. Liang and B. Fuller (1994) *School Choice and Family Policy: An Annotated Bibliography.* Cambridge, Harvard University.

- E. Rasell and R. Rothstein (1993) *School Choice: Examining the Evidence.* Economic Policy Institute, Washington D.C.

- A. Wells (1993) *A Time to Choose: America at the Crossroads of School Choice.* Hill and Wang, New York.

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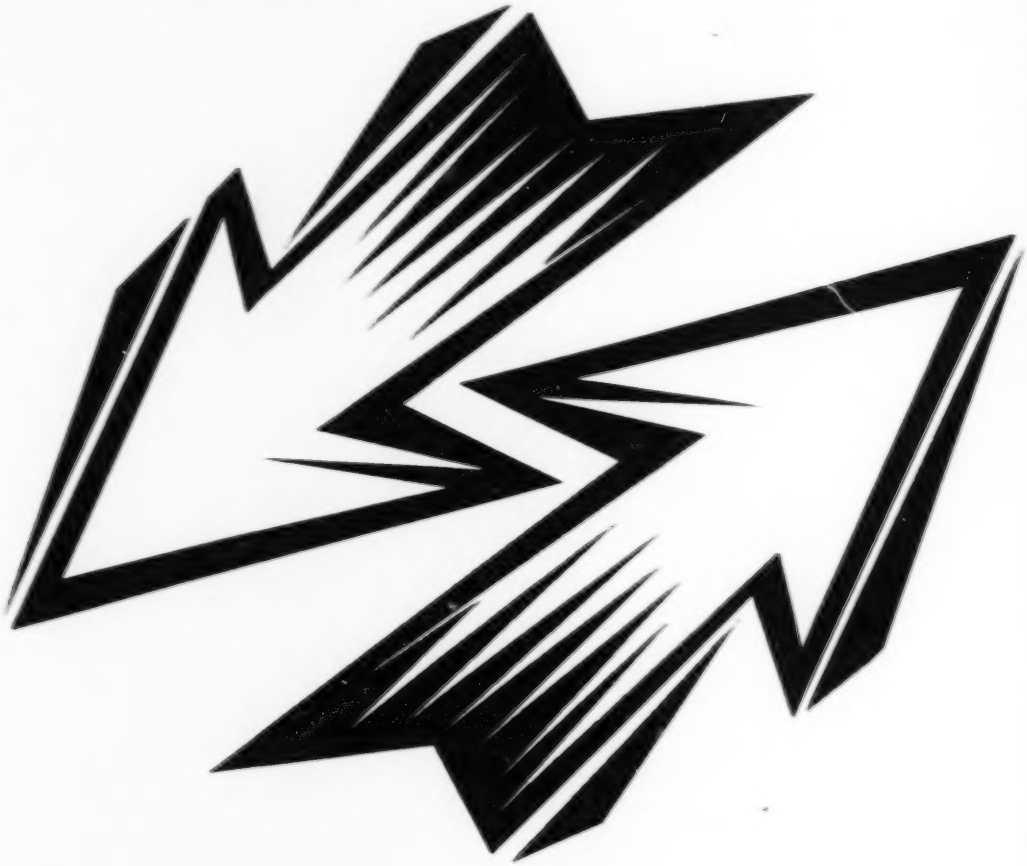

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